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INTERNATIONAL LITERACY YEAR: A TIME FOR ACTION

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Written/Produced/Narrated by: Ransford Cline-Thomas

Production Assistance by: Ed Tuazon

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INTERNATIONAL LITERACY YEAR: A TIME FOR ACTION

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NARRATOR: Perspective, on an issue of international concern. In this edition, International Literacy Year: A Time for Action. I am Ransford Cline-Thomas:

Cut 1
Enkhtsetseg
GA 44th Session
Third Committee
14 November 1989

Today, there are an estimated 890 million adult illiterates and more than 100 million children between the age of six and eleven in the developing countries who are not enrolled in school.

NARRATOR: Miss O. Enkhtsetseg of Mongolia, speaking in the UN General Assembly's Committee which deals with social, humanitarian and cultural matters:

Cut 2
Enkhtsetseg
(Ibid)

Unless urgent remedial action is taken, these youngsters will grow up to become adult illiterates of the 21st century. Thus, the eradication of illiteracy still remains as one of the critical challenges of our time.

NARRATOR: And, it is essentially for these reasons that in 1987, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed this year, 1990 as International Literacy Year. One of the main objectives of the Year is to increase action by the world community to ensure that every child can find a place in school and that illiterate youth and adults can receive instruction in reading, writing and other basic skills. But that's not all. Here is Geraldine Harris of UN Radio:

Cut 3
Geraldine Harris
UN Radio

International Literacy Year is also intended to promote public awareness of the extent of and damage done by illiteracy; to intensify public participation everywhere; to strengthen solidarity among nations and co-operation within the United Nations family with the purpose of achieving a literate world. One of the main goals of the Year is to launch a decade-long Plan of Action to combat illiteracy.

NARRATOR: It's estimated that even though ninety per cent of those who cannot read or write live in the developing countries, the industrialized countries are not immune to the problem. Illiteracy is a global problem. Again, Miss O. Enkhtsetseg of Mongolia:

Cut 4
Enkhtsetseg
GA 44th Session
Third Committee
14 November 1989

While illiteracy affects primarily the developing countries, the problem of functional illiteracy -- a relatively new phenomenon, when a level of literacy is inadequate to cope with the demands of a complex society -- is far more extensive and has become a serious concern to a growing number of affluent countries let alone the developing ones.

NARRATOR: According to UNESCO — that's the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, an illiterate person, among other things, cannot read or write a letter; look up a number in a telephone directory or understand a prescription for medicine. She cannot help the children with their homework nor can he hold a job requiring basic reading or writing skills. Male or female, an illiterate person cannot understand poison labels or other warnings. In short and in the words of the United Nations Secretary-General, Javier Perez de Cuellar, illiteracy is a serious obstacle to effective participation in society:

Cut 5
UN Secretary-General
UNESCO Launching
of ILY - 1990
6 December 1989

In much of the developing world, where mass illiteracy is rife, it constitutes a threat to the very progress of society, with all that this entails in terms of suffering, deprivation and missed opportunities. In an era which has been transformed by science and technology, it is evident that literacy and education are essential if societies are to meet the challenges of the future. Literacy is the most basic and essential of educational skills. It is also a means of liberating minds, of motivating women and men and of opening up new possibilities for building a better tomorrow.

NARRATOR: A similar view has also been expressed by the Director General of UNESCO, Federico Mayor who says that education is a vital and pervasive force in all aspects of our lives:

Cut 6
Mayor
(Ibid)

It shapes us as individuals and as societies. It also determines, in substantial measure, what we are and what we aspire to become.
Illiteracy does not, of course, preclude knowledge or wisdom. Indeed, there is genius in the oral traditions of all nations and peoples. Some of our wisest individuals cannot read or write. Yet, in the modern world, education is the most essential condition and powerful agent of progress. And literacy is the most basic and necessary of learning skills.

NARRATOR: So, the message of International Literacy Year, as UNESCO's Director General puts it, is that education matters and matters greatly. But illiteracy is not a simple matter. It is a complex and difficult problem. Yet a problem for which Federico Mayor says, we have an answer:

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Cut 7
Mayor
(Ibid)

We know how to combat it, and we are doing so with success. The rate of illiteracy in the adult population, for example, has declined from an estimated 40 per cent in 1960 to 28 per cent in 1990. What is more, for the first time, the absolute number of illiterates — currently put at 965 million — has begun to decline. If present trends persist, the number of adult illiterates will fall by 23 million between now and the end of the century. That is encouraging.

NARRATOR: UNESCO, the specialized agency of the United Nations taking the lead in the fight against illiteracy and which has been planning for this International Year has, of course, over the years, devoted well over half of its activities to education. A good part of the Agency's education budget totalling more than seventy million dollars is spent on promoting literacy. So, with literacy at the top of its agenda, UNESCO, from now until the end of 1999, will be implementing a Ten Year Plan of Action. The Plan has two priorities; first, the least developed countries where illiteracy is widespread and in some of which school enrolment is falling and second, women, who represent nearly two-thirds of the world's illiterate population:

Cut 8
Mayor
(Ibid)

These are already underway, in Latin America and the Caribbean; Africa; Asia and the Pacific; and in the Arab States. UNESCO's literacy activities extend across a broad spectrum, ranging from improving primary education to the design of low-cost facilities, materials and training programmes. They include education of the handicapped and disadvantaged; the promotion of book production, as well as field projects for rural women in all the developing regions of the world.

NARRATOR: As one UNESCO official has pointed out, the agency's role is essentially that of a catalyst, mediator and expert. The battle against illiteracy must be fought on all levels. Several countries, such as China, India, the Congo, Egypt, Indonesia, Morocco, Mozambique, Spain, Thailand, Togo and Turkey have already launched literacy programmes which will touch tens of millions of people. More than 80 countries have created national committees to coordinate their participation in the Year. UNESCO has emphasized that if universal literacy is going to be achieved, it requires an enormous collective effort involving governments, inter-governmental and non-governmental organizations as well as millions of communities and individuals around the world. The Director General, Federico Mayor has called on every one to get into the act:

Cut 9
Mayor
(Ibid)

First, that governments recognize their fundamental responsibility, renew their commitments, revise their priorities, and reinforce their efforts. Education is a public responsibility; governments are duty-bound to do all in their power to foster and promote it.

NARRATOR: The UN family of organizations also has a crucial role to play in the fight against illiteracy. In fact, UNESCO, the United Nations Children's Fund, the UN Development Programme and the World Bank have all come together in a partnership to sponsor a World Conference on Education for All -- Meeting Basic Learning Needs. This conference will be held in Bangkok, Thailand in March this year. Dr. Wadi Haddad, Senior Education Adviser at the World Bank, tells us more about the purpose of that conference:

Cut 10
Haddad
UN Radio Interview
April 1989

The conference has three main objectives. Number one, to highlight the problem of meeting basic learning needs. The second objective is to build a knowledge base for countries who would like to do something and hopefully all of them will want to do something; and so we would like to have this conference as a forum for countries to exchange experiences about the research they have done, the studies and their innovations and most importantly their experiences. The third objective of this initiative is that there will be a consensus built on the actions that can be taken in the form of a framework for countries, for groups of countries and for the international community to bring about a quick accelerated change in the pace of meeting the basic learning needs of the children and adults of the world.

NARRATOR: The conference will call for what is described as a "two-channel approach" to meeting basic learning needs. As far as primary education is concerned, the goal is that by the year 2000, 80 per cent of all 14 year-olds in every country of the world would have the opportunity to complete an adequate primary education. For adults, the goal is to ensure that all adults have access to basic skills and knowledge. Colin Power is UNESCO's Assistant Director for Education:

Cut 11
Power
UN Radio Interview
July 1989

Well, the two channels are firstly the realization of the idea of universal primary education for all children. We're far from that in many countries and certainly we are far from providing a high quality primary education for all, even in the developed countries because many children leave the formal education system and are inadequately

Cut 11 (cont'd)

prepared for life. So that's one channel. You need to stem illiteracy at its source, that is, in the lives of children, by providing an adequate basic education for them.

NARRATOR: And the second channel?

Cut 12
Power
(Ibid)

The second channel is then to recognize that there are a whole range of learning needs of adults, that is the young people who leave school early, adolescents, potential mothers and fathers of tomorrow but also the adults whose lives have been transformed by new technologies, whose situation in life has been transformed because of the collapse of the traditional ways of doing things -- to help them to cope with the change through adult literacy programmes, through basic education programmes which present key facts about life for the survival of their children, for the protection of the environment, for the stemming of population growth -- it's not just literacy but it's also key knowledge, essential knowledge, necessary for the future well-being of the planet and of all the people on it.

NARRATOR: A second event is scheduled for September 1990, when the International Conference on Education in Geneva will review national literacy and education plans.
One important set of players in the collective efforts to find solutions to the problem of illiteracy are the media. UNESCO's Director General Federico Mayor has appealed for their continued support:

Cut 13
Mayor
UNESCO Launching
of ILY - 1990
6 December 1989

I urge that the mass media -- the producers of radio and television programmes and the publishers of newspapers, magazines and books -- continue and increase their valuable contributions to literacy work. The media have a unique power to identify issues and problems, to focus public attention upon them and, in the case of illiteracy, a demonstrated ability to contribute to its solution.

NARRATOR: There is also a role for non-governmental organizations. Some thirty of these organizations have set up the International Task Force on Literacy (ITFL) to stimulate active participation during 1990 and beyond. But most important of all, the Director General, Federico Mayor, says is that all communities and authorities should work with and support the teachers and literacy workers of the world:

Cut 14
Mayor
(Ibid)

Their efforts are critical for the success of any literacy programme. All those who have benefitted from education should seek to actively help those who have been denied this precious opportunity. We must together find ways of helping illiterates to realize their right to education.

NARRATOR: The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), has made it categorically clear that if nothing is done, society will pay a high price for illiteracy. The longer action is delayed, it says, the more difficult it will be to resolve the problems of illiteracy.

And there we end this edition of Perspective. This is Ransford Cline-Thomas.

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